

The captain did the best he could

A Matter of Accountability

The True Story of
The Pueblo Affair.

By Trevor Armbrister.

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By RICHARD HALLORAN

Were this book fiction, it would have been an engrossing yarn of the sea, the intrigue of intelligence, and the perils of a harsh prison in a faraway land. But the story it tells is painfully true. Trevor Armbrister, who was a staff writer with The Saturday Evening Post at the time of its demise, has written an objective, dispassionate and graphic piece of reportage about perhaps the most controversial incident in modern American naval history.

Armbrister launches into his account at full speed, a pace he keeps up throughout most of the narrative. He begins his preface:

"An ill-prepared nation sends an unfit ship with an inexperienced crew on an unsuccessful, perhaps unnecessary mission off the coast of an unfriendly nation. The unexpected happens. The North Koreans attack. A startled Commander Lloyd M. Bucher decides he lacks the power to resist. He surrenders the ship. Washington reacts with shock and anger. No one has ever imagined that such a thing could happen. And this is the most disturbing aspect of the entire affair."

Thus Armbrister makes the critical point at the outset. He contends that Pueblo was doomed in advance, not so much by the North Koreans about whom she was to gather intelligence but by the Americans who sent her into the frigid waters of the Sea of Japan in January, 1968.

There were many facets to the Pueblo affair. There is the "system" of command through which the military, diplomatic, and intelligence authorities in Washington, Honolulu and Japan arrived at the decision to put Pueblo on station along the coast of North Korea. Armbrister skillfully analyzes the cumbersome process of recommendations and approvals that led to Pueblo's mission. He shows that the mission was deemed to have "minimal risk" because

specials misread the danger signs coming from North Korea. And those few officials who had misgivings did not speak out. The "minimal risk" evaluation also led to the decision to leave Pueblo without air cover or other emergency protection.

Mr. Halloran, of The Times Washington Bureau, covered the Pueblo affair in Korea for The Washington Post.

Even so, Pueblo's capture could have been prevented had the "system" responded to an unmistakably clear warning that the North Koreans were on the warpath. That was the attempt by 30 North Korean commandos to assassinate President Chung Hee Park of South Korea on the night of Jan. 21. They got within a 1000 yards of the Presidential mansion before they were discovered and cut down by South Korean security forces.

That was the high point in a two-year campaign of infiltration, terror and subversion on land and sea mounted by the North Koreans. It precipitated an intense crisis in Korea. Yet no American in authority saw the significance of the assassination attempt. No one thought to warn Commander Bucher even though 36 hours lapsed before his ship was in danger. Commander Bucher and all his superiors were taken by surprise when the attack came. Because the system had not prepared for that eventuality, there was little that anyone in it could do except flail around when the news arrived.

On the matter of accountability for the loss of the ship, a Navy court of inquiry recommended that Commander Bucher be given a general court-martial for surrendering his ship. But the Secretary of the Navy, John H. Chafee, said publicly that Commander Bucher and the others had suffered enough. Perhaps Mr. Chafee feared that the system and particularly its senior officers, rather than Commander Bucher, would be the ones really put on trial.

Armbrister writes: "Chafee's compromise decision was politically shrewd. It took the Navy off the hook." He adds, however, that Mr. Chafee's "decision skirted the larger, more important questions," questions such as why the military establishment was unable to foresee and prevent such a disaster, or to react when it did happen. Armbrister concludes, as did the crew of Pueblo and many other Navy men, that the system was to blame.

Another facet of the Pueblo affair was the way Commander Bucher and his crew handled themselves. From this book, one can have only admiration for the ship's captain, the orphan from Boy's Town who struggled to make his way in the world. "Pete" Bucher is a hero in a book full of villains. Not everything he did was perfect, but his mistakes were those of the head, not of the heart. Armbrister gives a full portrait of the skipper who did the best he could with the ship and men he was given. In the brutal North Korean prison, Commander Bucher led his crew in their courage, perseverance, resilience, and even their grim humor. There was one exception among the brave crew but Armbrister mercifully leaves him unnamed.

The Pueblo

incident occurred at a time of increasing tension in Korea and continuing disagreement between American and South Korean officials over what it meant and what to do about it. The South Koreans wanted to take stern action against the North; the Americans, tied down in Vietnam, wanted to do everything possible to keep down the level of hostilities.

Moreover, the seizure of Pueblo came just before the Communist Tet offensive in South Vietnam. It probably can't be proven, but many observers in Asia at the time believed that there was a definite connection between events in Korea in January and those in Vietnam in February. Armbrister touches on these points but he doesn't take the opportunity to place the Pueblo affair in its larger political context. (A minor stylistic fault in the book is Armbrister's use, without explanation, of Navy abbreviations, such as COMNAVFORJAPAN [Commander, Naval Forces, Japan] and other designators. A major fault is the absence of both a table of contents and an index.)

Trevor Armbrister has told Americans much about themselves. Something in the national psyche keeps Americans from expecting surprises. Preparations to prevent them or to react swiftly to them are not made. Too often those inside and outside the system ignore genuine warnings are passed off as propaganda. Americans rarely

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